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Wage Gaps in Professional Sports

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Wage Gaps in Professional Sports

Abstract

"If America actually cares about wage parity in professional athletics, the country is going to need to show up—literally."

Posting about wage and gender equity in athletics from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/wage-gaps-in-professional-sports/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Wage Gaps in Professional Sports

 [all in allthings.org/wage-gaps-in-professional-sports/](http://allthings.org/wage-gaps-in-professional-sports/)

Bill Elgersma

The traffic is bumper to bumper on I-80 from Lincoln almost to Omaha. The cars creep but no one blows horns. Flags flap proudly above the roofs as Husker fans, en route, support their team for a home game. It is 11 am and the game won't start until 4. But this is a tradition. In the fall of the year the ritual is duplicated across the country. America is a fan-based nation. It loves its teams and everything from t-shirts to mailboxes to the sides of barns all proudly tout their choice.

But this is a learned culture; in some ways it appears to be a rite of passage where parents pass along the secrets of loyalty to sons or daughters. My mother-in-law, a Chicago native in her 80s, was loyal to her hapless Cubs, and my father, a Maple Leafs fan, smoked heavily when they lost. When he died, I wanted to send them a note telling them their lack of performance for many years single-handedly shortened his life while increasing Du Maurier cigarette stock. Performance and win loss records don't necessarily breed loyalty. Affinity does.

That is until it comes to women's athletics. While we are occasionally willing to take in a game, for most in the country, this is not as much planned as occurring. [SportsBusinessDaily](#) reports attendance at professional women's basketball games (WNBA) averaged 7,318 fans, and according to [OregonLive.com](#), the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) attendance averaged 5,046, an increase of 22 percent from 2014 because of the World Cup exposure last summer. High school football games in Texas have a greater draw.

Most in America are not aware that a National Women's Soccer League exists, let alone who might play in it. And in fairness, many should get a pass on this. With the amount of sports televised today including reruns of any sport a person might want (or not), why should anyone care? America's national cricket or rugby teams receive about as much attention as the National Women's Soccer League, so this isn't just a gender issue. A correlation between television contracts and both popularity and financial gain exists. What we don't see on television is not going to get a seat at the table with the heavyweights like the NFL or MLB.

Salaries reflect this. While Serena Williams took in \$24.6 million between June of 2014-2015; Sharapova earned \$29.7 million in the same time period. But both of these amounts include prizes and endorsements according to Badenhausen, a writer for [Forbes Magazine](#). Danica Patrick a NASCAR driver, earned \$13.9 million, while Ronda Rousey of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) earned \$6.5 million. While the amounts are sizeable, they are all-inclusive sums. Considering the broadcast coverage of these sports, the theory seems to work.

Moving to team sports where players are paid by the season, not the match or the race, looking below at the salary box with minimum and maximum salaries in professional sports, the disparity is staggering. An additional league, the WNBA, was absent from the list and their maximum is \$107,500 according to David Berri of [Vice Sports](#).

The easy answer to the disparity would be to dismiss this as sexist and discrimination—the glass ceiling effect. The league claims the resources are not available to support larger salaries, and three failed professional women's soccer leagues can attest to that in the past. But Diana Taurasi, a standout in the WNBA, plays for a team in Russia in the off season for \$1.5 million, and they are paying her more than her current WNBA salary to sit out the coming WNBA season. In 2013, Megan Rapinoe, a brilliant midfielder for the US National Soccer team, played for Lyon, France for about \$14,000 per month—making more in a month than some will earn in a season.¹ So the money to support professional women's sports is out there—in other countries.

If America actually cares about wage parity in professional athletics, the country is going to need to show up—literally. In the sports-crazed world of the 21st century, athletes follow the money, and loyalty to the homeland is a

distant second. American soccer players in Europe and the UK attest to that. But the only way teams are going to put up the salaries to help athletes decide where to call home is if the fans walk through the gates. Until soccer parks are filled on a consistent basis, the owners are not going to ante up regardless of whether they can afford to. And even then, athletes can expect a slow shift. While the Women’s World Cup final last summer drew about 25.4 million viewers reports *Fox Sports*—the highest number to watch a soccer match in the U.S.—the current wages do not reflect the growing popularity. Five members of the Women’s National Soccer team recently sued the US Soccer Federation for wage discrimination. According to *ESPN*, the women’s team received \$2 million in total for winning the World Cup in the summer of 2015 while the US men’s team received \$9 million in total for going 1-2-1 at the World Cup in Brazil. They never moved beyond the round of sixteen teams. The disparity in wages for friendlies and even the issue of pay versus no pay for playing in friendlies beyond the required amount of games adds to the discrimination. But all of that will be settled in court. The real test, the question of U.S. fan support for the league not the World Cup contenders, is the difference between fair-weather fans and Cubs and Leafs supporters, and in the end, that will be the difference between wage parity and wage discrimination.

	Minimum Salaries for Professional U.S. Sports Players ²	Maximum Salaries for Professional U.S. Sports Players
National Hockey League	\$550,000	\$10.5 million
National Basketball League	\$507,336	\$24.8 million
Major League Baseball	\$500,000	\$31 million
National Football League	\$420,000	\$22 million
Major League Soccer	\$60,000	\$7.1 million
National Women's Soccer League	\$6,842	\$37,800

Footnotes

1. [Badenhusen](#) ↩
2. Fortier, Sam. “The Minimum Pro Female Soccer Salary Is below the Poverty Line.” *Esquire*. ↩